



Neil Faulkner. *Lawrence of Arabia's War: The Arabs, the British and the Remaking of the Middle East in WWI.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. xvii + 528 pp. Illustrations. \$37.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-19683-2.

Reviewed by Ali Benek (Mississippi State)

Published on H-War (October, 2017)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

“The book is not a military biography of T. E. Lawrence, nor even a military history of the Arab Revolt—though it involves both. Rather, it is an attempt to understand the war that played out in the Middle East between 1914 and 1918 in all its dimensions—the war that has given the region its essential form throughout the century since” (p. xiii). So writes Neil Faulkner cautiously to inform the reader what to expect from the rest of his recent book, *Lawrence of Arabia's War: The Arabs, the British and the Remaking of the Middle East in WWI*. Throughout his 552-page tome, Faulkner treats the British campaigns in Sinai and later at the gates of Palestine along with the British-backed Arab Revolt as an integrated whole (noting that they have been studied separately thus far), and adroitly explains how they converged across both time and space. In an attempt to write a holistic history of the First World War in the Middle East, the author also incorporates into his account archeological and anthropological insights that he was able to garner from the extensive fieldwork carried out from 2006 to 2016 under the Great Arab Revolt Project. After seventeen chronologically arranged chapters, Faulkner comes to a conclusion in which he invokes David Fromkin's sweeping phrase “a peace to end all peace” and argues that the seeds of today's fractured Middle

East were indeed sown during the First World War.

Faulkner devotes the first quarter of the book to the historical dynamics that eventually brought the multiethnic British and Ottoman Empires into conflict on the sands of Sinai. He initially provides a sound analysis of how the Ottoman Empire rolled into the war against Britain and how both sides perceived each other on that path. The major Allied powers had imperial designs on Ottoman territories; thus, the author notes, they were aware that an Ottoman alliance would not benefit their ends in the event of an Allied victory. Faulkner also acknowledges that the Ottoman Empire was not dragged into the war by a hostile Entente or its German ally but rather was motivated by its own reasons and objectives to enter the war. A “revanchist” impetus, along with geopolitical imperatives, prompted the Ottoman government to perceive Germany as “the *only* power which desired to see Turkey strong,” and eventually ensured a pro-German militarist mind-set over a pro-Entente faction in CUP leadership (p. 51). Following this introduction to the Ottoman road to war comes a thorough comparison of Ottoman military power in all its aspects to its counterparts in the Entente block. Compounded by an insufficient industrial base, the lack of experienced of-

ficers—due to losses suffered during the Balkan Wars—and inadequate manpower mobilization left the Ottoman military vulnerable in the coming of the war. Identifying the First World War as “a railway war,” Faulkner draws particular attention to the weakness of the Ottoman infrastructure vis-à-vis modern industrialized warfare (p. 65). Undersupplied armies and poor-quality military support services due to a limited industrial capacity thus prompt the author to call this “the most terrible war in Turkish history” (p. 71).

In *Lawrence of Arabia's War*, Faulkner chronicles in detail how, after the conclusion of the Gallipoli campaign, the British strategy switched from the defense of the Suez Canal in Sinai to initiating an offensive move at the gates of Palestine, and later converged with the Arab Revolt forces in Syria to strike the final blow against Ottoman war-making before the armistice was signed at Mudros. Beginning with the Battle of Katia in early 1916 and ending with the Syrian campaign in late 1918, the book predominantly narrates the battles fought between the Ottomans and the British, along with the campaigns related to the Arab Revolt. While analyzing these battles, Faulkner provides the reader with detailed maps for a better understanding of the strategic and tactical considerations of the warring sides. He also deserves credit for reaching beyond what is known as traditional military history. He presents the reader with the harsh geographical and environmental conditions in which battles were fought. As Faulkner notes, men on both sides experienced the misery of fighting a desert war; heat, thirst, and scorching sand impeded marching men, crushing their will to fight, while flies posed more of a threat than the enemy as they easily spread disease. To provide a more striking portrayal of individual soldiers in these conditions, he employs a “history from below” approach, giving a voice to the men in arms by making use of firsthand accounts.

Exploring the war through an anthropological framework is another contribution that *Lawrence of Arabia's War* makes to the historiography of the First World War in the Middle East. According to Faulkner, the way men in boots thought and acted on the battlefield was shaped not only by military training but also by the social and cultural context from which they were recruited. Understanding the unexpected resilience of Anatolian peasant conscripts in defending the trenches and the significant capacity of the Bedouin to wage guerilla warfare, Faulkner claims, resides in anthropological analysis of the war. Besides ideological motivation, such as nationalism or Islamic jihadism, coming from a peasant life, where attachment to land was fierce and hardship and challenging outdoor conditions were customary, provided the “lowly Turk” with the tenacity and inherent ability to resist the materially superior enemy that they needed to survive in modern industrialized warfare (p. 311). The Bedouin, on the other hand, had no such attachment to the land and therefore were reluctant to perform trench warfare. However, their inclination to move continually in search of water and grazing lands in the desert made them a perfect fit for guerilla fighting. Faulkner underscores the military wisdom of Lawrence in grasping the anthropological aspects of war and turning the Arab tribesmen into efficient modern insurgents. By virtue of their mobility and ability to stretch time and space, the Bedouin, in Lawrence’s words, became “the silent threat of a vast, unknown desert,” crippling the Ottoman fighting capacity in the interior through a war of hit and run (p. xvi). Thus, the war in the Middle East stood out, in Faulkner’s words, as “a hybrid of two very different but highly complementary parts, a large, conventional, highly mechanised army operating in tandem with a desert-based tribal insurgency” (p. 450).

Despite the title of the book, as Faulkner warns at the beginning, the figure of Lawrence does not dominate the narrative. Yet, in addition to being the mastermind behind the strategy of

the Arab Revolt, in Faulkner's portrayal, Lawrence also appears as "a metaphor for the imperialism, violence and betrayals that tore the region apart a century ago and has left it divided into warring fragments ever since" (p. xvi). Lawrence was caught between the realpolitik of British imperialism and the Arab desire for self-rule, which according to the author made him suffer "an inner psychic crisis" both during and after the war (p. 263). However, overemphasizing the guilt he felt over broken promises to Arab leaders does not suffice to explain Lawrence's post-traumatic stress disorder, but rather would be misleading.

Throughout the book, Faulkner also attempts to highlight the tragedy of the war, defining the war in the Middle East as "a conflict whose violent consequences have ricocheted across the region for a century" (p. xiv). However, his account of the violence committed by soldiers on both sides remains partial. While Faulkner continually addresses "the medieval barbarism" of the Ottoman military and public administration (pp. 184-187), he allocates considerably less space to the violent acts of British soldiers (p. 384). Making this contrast even more dramatic, the author tries to promote a more advanced "genocide and ethnic-cleansing" of Armenians than can be gleaned from Lawrence's account (p. 78). Further to that, his rendition is imbalanced source-wise, too. Peter Balakian's *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (2003) and Henry Morgenthau's memoir, whose accuracy on this issue is still in question,[1] stand out as the only sources of which Faulkner makes use. The author puts a particular blame for this imbalance on the closure of the Turkish military archives to foreign scholars, but this inequity is not confined to the Armenian question and instead repeats itself throughout the book. He could have consulted translated versions of accounts written by Turkish historians, which would have been fruitful in terms of seeing "the other side of the hill."

Despite the shortcomings mentioned above, Faulkner's *Lawrence of Arabia's War* constitutes one of the best accounts of the First World War in the Middle East to date, particularly because of its interdisciplinary approach. Faulkner does an excellent job of analyzing the British campaigns in the context of the Arab Revolt, especially by moving beyond the traditional concept of military history. Seasoned with anthropological and archaeological insights, the book provides a better understanding of the politico-military history of the conflicts that gave shape to today's Middle East. *Lawrence of Arabia's War*, therefore, is a must-read not just for academics, but also for those interested in exploring what unfolded in the Middle Eastern theater of the First World War.

Note

[1]. See Heath Lowry, *The Story behind Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Istanbul: Isis Press, 1990).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Ali Benek. Review of Faulkner, Neil. *Lawrence of Arabia's War: The Arabs, the British and the Remaking of the Middle East in WWI*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49481>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.